

Republicans and Democrats held caucus meetings to decide their next steps. The Republicans concentrated on who to elect mayor, and the Democrats on how to regain lost power. The new aldermen were to be sworn in the next day, but the Democrats, who were in control of the previous Board of Aldermen, planned to refuse to vacate their seats on grounds that the election was not valid. The Republicans sought to thwart the action by meeting early in the day. However, three of the new Aldermen, all Democrats, failed to show. The Republicans assumed a quorum was in place and continued with activity as the new board members presented their proof of being elected and qualified. The members were then sworn into office by Justice of the Peace G. Z. French, after which they elected Silas P. Wright mayor and elected H. C. Twining to fill Wright's vacancy on the board. The board then took over the city offices and appointed Populist John Melton as chief of police, as well as other members of the police force. They adjourned for the day and decided to wait until their first day of regular business in April for the rest of their appointments.<sup>35</sup>

But the Democrats had another plan. They had persuaded the three recently elected Democrats not to be part of the new board. Then the old board and mayor met in city hall to state that the new election was held under changes to the city charter they deemed unconstitutional, and, therefore, it was their duty to hold their seats since the election was not valid. The same day the three recently elected Democrats met with the five Democratic runners-up from the recent election, holding that these men had been duly elected following the pattern of elections from the early 1890s in which two men from each ward were elected to the

board. These men also organized themselves as the Board of Aldermen, proved their elections, were sworn in, and elected a mayor from their ranks. Therefore, on March 26, 1897, Wilmington had three sets of men claiming the ability to run city government.<sup>36</sup>

On March 29, Mayor Wright and his Board of Aldermen met to appoint the remaining members of city government to their posts, instructing Chief of Police Melton to not let anyone into the room unless they had specific business with the board. Other members of city government were appointed, all of whom were Republican and relatively new to public office. The Democrats saw that the Republicans could then establish a new legacy for their party, much like that run by the Democrats since Reconstruction. The Democrats' court case was their only hope to come out of the debacle ahead of the Republicans. They sought to prove that the 1897 changes to the city charter were unconstitutional and that the 1897 election was void.<sup>37</sup>

Superior Court opened on April 14, 1897 and for three days of debate and testimony presented by counsels for all of the men claiming the mayor's office. At the end of the debate, the court found that the 1897 changes were unconstitutional and that Mayor Harriss and the old Board of Aldermen were the legal government for the city until successors were elected. Wright and others filed an appeal to the state supreme court, which heard the case in its September term. The state supreme court found that the 1897 election was valid because the changes to the laws were made by the legislature, a duly elected body meant to represent the people, and followed the

<sup>35</sup> Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 40 – 41; Minutes, 1884-1898, Wilmington Board of Aldermen, State Archives.

<sup>36</sup> A similar confusion of multiple municipal officers also took place in New Bern. Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 42 – 43; Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 43 – 45.